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Giovanni Verga and Narcís Oller: Points of Affinity **Peter Cocozzella**

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GIOVANNI VERGA AND NARCÍS OLLER: POINTS OF AFFINITY

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Two accomplished novelists of the late nineteenth century, the world renowned Giovanni Verga (1840-1922) and the relatively obscure Narcís Oller (1846-1930) — Sicilian the one, Catalan the other — lend themselves, eminently, to a comparative study. Here I shall not search for signs of specific influences between Verga and Oller; rather, I shall focus upon the affinities or the points of coincidence evidenced in their productions with the hope of shedding some light upon the remarkable achievements of the lesser known of the two, the Oller who to this day has not gained among critics the wide recognition he justly deserves.

A birds-eye view of those productions reveals in both authors a significant deviation from the consecrated canons of Realism and Naturalism. In reaction to the powerful sway of the prevailing literary movements of their day, both Verga and Oller strove to fashion their distinctive styles as a true reflection of their personal world view and as a genuine expression of their unique insights into *la condition humaine*. In a memorable letter, dated April 21, 1878, addressed to his friend Salvatore Paola, Verga leaves no doubt as to his own objective: the investing of each of his *romanzi*, most of which were still in the planning stage, with a «fisionomia speciale», a feature all its own (Simioni 13). In the same letter he foreshadows a personal adaptation of the guiding principles given wide currency by such luminaries as Balzac and Zola. «Il realismo», he adds, «io, l'intendo così, come la schietta ed evidente manifestazione dell'osservazione coscienziosa, la sincerità dell'arte, in una parola» (quoted in Simioni 13).

In much the same vein, Oller, driven by his own ambitions to emulate rather than imitate the revered masters, will not be

overwhelmed by fashionable and influential literary trends. He chooses, thus, to temper, if not reject altogether, the mood of detached observation, stressed by Zola and the other true-to-form *naturalistes*, who were guided, as is well known, by the methods of scientific analysis. Far from the dispassionate, clinical contemplation that the sophisticates would have him adopt, Oller develops an attitude of impassioned involvement into the complex human experiences to which he holds up a mirror by means of his narratives. With good reason Manuel de Montoliu sees

Narcís Oller com l'home menys dotat que puguem imaginar per a seguir el precepte de l'escola realista sobre la impassibilitat del novel·lista davant dels conflictes i passions que descriu en la seva obra. N'Oller, més que un pur i simple realista, és un apassionat, un fanàtic de la realitat i del realisme (20).

These observations echo some telling remarks by Joan Sardà, an intimate friend of Oller:

Per a ell [Oller] en art no hi ha més que un déu: la realitat; ni més que una religió o forma d'adoració: la pintura d'aquesta realitat. En aquest punt és un intransigent, un fanàtic... N'Oller és un fanàtic de la veritat en l'art. No admet los idealismes en la pintura de la naturalesa interna. (Quoted in Montoliu 19).

Small wonder, then, that in his own preface to the French translation of Oller's first full-length novel, *La Papallona* — a translation which appeared in 1885, three years later than the work's original publication — Zola himself makes an issue of the sentimental verve, the «talent attendri», as he calls it, that informs Oller's narrative technique. It is precisely this trait which, coming to bear upon «la vie cruelle», to use Zola's very words, bans Oller's art from the parameters of Naturalism because, as Zola suggests, it divorces the verisimilitude of the setting («un milieu très exact») — «Barcelone s'agite dans ces descriptions avec une réalité intense» — from the idealization of the characters than

inhabit such a cruel world: «les personnages marchent un peu au-dessus de la terre, les pires aussi bien que les meilleurs» (quoted in Serrahima 1073).¹

This dialectic that Zola himself perceives in Oller between the harshness faithfully and impartially reproduced in the description of a down-to-earth ambiance («un milieu très exact») and the inner impulses of human behavior, recaptured in such a way that the personages to whom they are ascribed become significantly, if slightly, idealized («légèrement idéalisés»), finds its appropriate analogues in the intriguing dynamics that Guido Baldi, a perceptive reader of Verga, discovers in this author's art of the narrative. On the one hand, Verga identifies a nucleus of unadulterated, pristine virtues, which become a «fixed mark», a constant point of orientation, a manifestation of the highest values — «valori puri» as Baldi calls them (25) — «'oggettivamente' e 'universalmente' validi» (37). That is to say, they are universally appreciated precisely because they remain «objective», undefiled by the touch of greed, vested interests, and the myriad forms of profiteering. More often than not, these universal values lie hidden in the subsurface of the narrative: they remain implicit rather than overtly stated or, as Baldi puts it, «restano virtuali rispetto al piano effettivo del narrato» (37). On the other hand, Verga embodies the «valori puri» in particular characters — Patron 'Ntoni and the other members of the Malavoglia clan are emblematic of this phenomenon — and then watches these individuals struggle in a setting in which the law of the jungle, the «spietata legge economica», prevails. The gripping dynamics of Verga's famed *novelle* and *romanzi* issues, then, from this very process of pitting the latter-day descendants of the Romantic noble savage, the Malavoglia of this world and their kindred spirits, against the inimical reality of the everyday world, which Baldi defines as the «realtà di fatto, con l'agire e il pensare gret-

¹ For some additional comments on Zola's all-important criticism on Oller, see Arnau 8-9 and Montoliu 17.

to, ottuso e 'naturalmente' crudele dell'ambiente in cui i protagonisti sono immersi» (25).

Can we find in Oller's *oeuvre* some significant points of coincidence with the distinctive dynamics of Verga's narrative? We may safely answer this question in the affirmative if we bear in mind Oller's Romantic strain, which informs, to borrow Serrahima's happy phrase, Oller's «distinció moral» and moves the author of *La febre d'or* to idealize goodness while relegating evil to the realm of vulgarity if not utter grotesqueness (Serrahima 1078). True to the spirit of his «distinció moral», Oller displays his own gallery of virtuous specimens of humanity — Bernat, Francesc, Mònica, Catarina, and Gil Foix himself, to name the leading characters of *La febre d'or*— the living depositories of the «valori puri» and impressive counterparts of Verga's Malavoglia and company. Oller portrays, as does Verga, the vicissitudes of those exemplary human beings who must come to terms with the frenetic activism of their society while not losing sight of the ethical imperatives that will obtain even in the affairs ruled by fierce capitalistic competitiveness. Righteousness, Oller shows us, stays clear of the disastrous ways of greed and idle phantasies. Thus, in accordance with Serrahima's perceptive comments, a tinge of moralizing colors Oller's vision of man's struggle to gain wealth an influence or, at times, merely to survive:

Així el món de Narcís Oller, que no pot ésser el dels rics, no és tampoc el dels pobres com a tals pobres. Diríem més aviat que és el món dels actius i no el dels passius, però el dels actius en l'activitat justificada — externa i interna — i no en la que mouen només la fantasia o la cobdícia. (1090-1)

On the basis of the moralistic parameters implicit in Oller's world view, Serrahima can envisage a code of conduct — a Catalan work ethic of sorts — by which to assess Gil Foix's innate dignity and good nature despite his perilous straying away from the straight and narrow path of uprightness:

La feblesa de Gil Foix és en la seva vanitat i en el seu refiar-se, més que del treball, d'un enginy que tantes vegades — llavors i ara — acosta l'especulador i fins el financer al camp, tan pobre en dignitat humana, de la vida picaresca. I si Gil Foix conserva, a través dels seus desastres, una bona dosi d'humana dignitat li ve d'haver estat un treballador aferissat que pot tornar a ésser-ho. (1091)

The ethical issue, so prominent in Oller, is not as apparent in Verga, who does not rely on a code external to a character in order to assess that character's conduct and bring to light a «tragic flaw» in a man's or a woman's life. A particularly revealing case in point is Mastro-don Gesualdo, a protagonist who bears a natural resemblance to, and, therefore, warrants a comparison with Oller's Gil Foix. Verga's portrayal of Gesualdo's downfall capitalizes upon a deterministic view of fate's overbearing presence in the course of human existence, which, paradoxically enough, does not exclude a sense of personal responsibility in the final outcome of the events in one's life. This paradoxical blend of determinism at a universal level and responsibility in the microcosmic realm of an individual's existence transforms Gesualdo into both a helpless carrier of the pandemic «febre d'or» and a culpable perpetrator of a transgression against his own moral integrity. As Giovanni Cechetti points out,

[Gesualdo's] philosophy, and the philosophy behind the novel, may be found in two undisputed aphorisms: «The world belongs to those who have money», and «Everyone looks after his own interest». But although Don Gesualdo's plans and actions are in harmony with these principles, he never appears narrow-minded or narrowly self-centered. «His own interest» often involves the interest of several other people. The philosophy that brings him success, however, carries within itself the seeds of his destruction. Unlike Mazzarò, Don Gesualdo uses his wealth to achieve respectability and power by marrying into the town's aristocracy, thereby renouncing Diodata, the only person capable of self-sacrifice and of love. It will be precisely his social vanity — a new

and different kind of greed — that will cause him to lose all his wealth to his equally greedy aristocratic son-in-law, and to die alone, tolerated by his own daughter and despised by her servants. (xi)

Evidently, Gesualdo gains in dramatic stature, as would any hero in Classical Greek tragedy, because of his complete internalization of the universal code based on the power of money and on people's irrepressible desire to gain power through wealth. «Poderoso caballero es don Dinero» could very well be his lifelong motto. By isolating Gesualdo and elevating him to an epic dimension, Verga makes him a law unto himself and it is to himself and to the law which he embodies that ultimately he must be held into account. From this derives the sense of personal responsibility for the «tragedy» of his life.

This suggestive pattern of similarities and contrasts between Verga's Gesualdo Motta and Oller's Gil Foix may be appropriately assessed in terms of the narrator's point of view, which Guido Baldi has already identified as a key factor in Verga's composition of his «veristic» novels. Baldi traces the various stages according to which Verga's narrative proceeds in unison with the involvement of a centralized, unifying point of view. At the heart of Verga's technique — «un peculiare uso degli strumenti della tecnica narrativa» (Baldi 31) — we discern the operation of the various principles of what Baldi calls «l'artificio della regressione» (32). Whereas, from a strictly philosophical position, Verga cannot imagine, for the lives he focuses upon, any alternative other than the one exemplified by the plot he actually narrates; whereas he is fully aware that there is no change possible in the infrastructure of the social system he contemplates, he is convinced, says Baldi,

che il meccanismo che domina il mondo sociale presente, in tutte le sue articolazioni di classe e di ambiente, sia l'unica realtà possibile, 'naturale' e immodificabile (31)

Verga cannot resort to the time-honored device of the omniscient narrator who tends to intervene personally in the events related. He opts instead for «*mettersi nella pelle dei suoi personaggi*», «*vedere le cose coi loro occhi ed esprimerle colle loro parole*», «*regressing*» to an anonymous narrator who belongs to the same social ambiance that is being depicted and shares the same point of view as the personage who is being portrayed (32). The result of this «*regressione*» is the distortion implicit in that narrator's point of view, which is at odds with the more reliable world view espoused by the reader and the author himself. The ultimate effect of this complex process is the affirmation or the vindication of the aforementioned «*valori puri*», which the reader and the author alike hold in high esteem at core of their beliefs. Thus, to quote Baldi once again,

la sfasatura che... nasce tra deformazione operata dal 'narratore' popolare e realtà effettiva, e dal gioco di diversi punti di vista a cui l'abbandono della prospettiva unificante dell'autore dà origine (35)

underscores the virtues represented by such heroes as Rosso Malpelo, who introduce in a world ruled by

la logica dell'interesse egoistico e la legge del più forte, (35)
la luce della coscienza, garantendo la possibilità di un distacco conoscitivo e di una lucida definizione del negativo, e ripristinando quel margine critico rispetto all'oggetto, quel confronto di 'codici' che la regressione e la rinuncia all'intervento giudicante dell'autore parevano dover compromettere (35).

A perusal of Oller's works would reveal, I believe, some striking analogies with the relationship, meticulously studied by Baldi, between the point of view of Verga's narrator and the veristic narrative itself. In Oller's *La febre d'or*, for instance, we recognize a phenomenon quite significant in Verga's more typical narratives. In these we are likely to find, as Baldi explains, an awed narrator who, after mythicizing the protagonist, mutates into the

latter's alter ego and unmediated spokesman. We witness this very phenomenon in Verga's *novella* «La roba» (1880), which begins with the attitude of wonderment adopted by the narrator, whose «fantasticherie», in Baldi's words,

opera la trasfigurazione di Mazzarò in una sota de *deus absconditus*, in una misteriosa divinità onnipresente che si identifica panteisticamente con la natura intera (137).

In the very first chapter of *La febre d'or* we perceive the same type of narrator reflected in the consciousness of Josep Rodon, who, while contemplating Barcelona's Llotja, is lost in a train of daydreams concerning the fabulous riches and the concomitant miraculous powers of the Borsa:

I, així pensant, el temps se li feia etern, desitjós de trobar-se en el bull-bull de la Borsa, de veure per quin art d'encantament naixien aquelles deus de riquesa que, per corrents invisibles, anaven curullant les caixes del banquer i de l'home de renda, eixamplant el crèdit de tothom, obrint camins i canals, i prometent regenerar ben aviat la saba de la vella Europa amb transfusions d'or, el millor dels tònic per a combatre la probresa d'aquell organisme gastat i xaruc. Ell no l'havia vista funcionar mai, la Borsa; però coneixia, per periòdics i converses, son temple amb *l'ardent fanatisme del neòfit*. (1.1; 321. Underlining mine.)²

And, in this setting, in perfect control of the situation, appears Gil Foix, perceived through Rodon's eyes in a quasi-mythical light, a fit counterpart of Verga's redoubtable Mazzarò:

Però encara, en aquell vestibul, en Rodon hagué de fondre greix bona estona. En Gil Foix el deixava: corria per allí caçant a l'un i a l'altre per canviar dos mots, donant ordres als dependents, recollint la darre-ra cotització, encara llefiscosa i mullada; parlant amb tal o tal altre ban-

² The ciphers within parentheses refer to the standard divisions (part and chapter) of *La febre d'or* and to the pagination of vol. 1 of the *Obres completes*, listed under «Bibliography» below.

quer, eixint al carrer i abocant-se, per fi, barret a mà, a la portella d'un cupè per dir, molt amable, a una marquesa que l'esperava, que havia complert son encàrrec. (I.I; 329)

Both Verga's and Oller's masterpieces exhibit, as I have suggested, a shift in perspective at a point in which the narrator becomes, as if by a process of symbiosis, a projection of the protagonist's realm of experience and overall consciousness. According to Baldi, this type of narrator is a faithful reflection of the changing moods and the global psychic profile of the protagonist portrayed in all the fascinating aura of the self-made man. Even while apparently focussing on the factual data of the world around him from the vantage point of an outsider, the narrator at this stage recaptures, in effect, the protagonist's highly subjective outlook. In Baldi's own words, that all-important, self-avowed objective purveyor of the hero's subjectivity,

insinua per un momento nella serie dei dati oggettivi, visti da un occhio esterno alla scena, la percezione propria del personaggio stesso, riproduce i suo modo soggettivo di sentire la fatica, la sofferenza ascetica del lavoro. (143)

With a minimum of *mutatis mutandis* these keen observations well may apply to that ubiquitous observer in *La fièvre d'or* who reflects Gil Foix's voluptuous enjoyment of his moment in the sun — an act of fruition, metaphysical and visceral all in one:

En Foix no cabia a la pell. «El carril seria un fet dintre pocs dies. L'Eladi, enviat a París per estudiar, d'acord amb en Ramon Pi, el corresponsal de la casa, la manera més eficaç de col·locar accions, assegurava des d'allí, que, si es volia, es col·locarien totes en aquell mercat. Els diaris espanyols i francesos es mostraven també ben disposats i poc exigents per a la propaganda. Vilaniu i tota l'encontrada de la Vall de Flors responien amb entusiasme a la subscripció d' accions i condonació de via. En tornant l'Eladi de París, hi hauria la gran reunió a Vilaniu; es constituiria la societat, de la qual, ell, en Foix, seria gerent amb

sis mil duros de sou i cotxe a la porta. D'altre cantó — i aquesta era la més grossa i la que feia parlar més baix i amb més tremolins a en Gil Foix —, si els Nords seguien pujant, seria ric, i ric de debò, ben aviat.» (I.13; 412)

The euphoria of a headstrong hero like Oller's Gil Foix or Verga's Mazzarò or Mastro-don Gesualdo easily changes into overconfidence and hubris, which, in turn, proves to be infectious and especially so to the infatuated observer who turns out to be the omniscient narrator. Hubris, unwisely indulged, can vitiate the symbiotic bound between protagonist and narrator with a distorted perspective and a skewed sense of values. A Gil Foix who allows the exhilaration of success unquestionably to go to his head, a Mazzarò or Gesualdo, enraptured by the sheer mystique of the accumulation of wealth, connive with their literary alter egos, their respective observers or narrators, to make acceptable, to legitimize, a topsy-turvy restructuring of the ethical code. Theirs is, indeed, a «trastorno de la moral», which Bruce Wardropper would ascribe to a *pícaro's* swashbuckling his way through life.

Here Guido Baldi, once again, chimes in to provide an insightful description of a point of view inherently flawed («un'ottica stravolta») which, not unlike the reflection in Valle-Inclán's *espejo cóncavo*, produces a distortion of momentous consequences:

Si avverte qui chiaramente come l'ottica apologetica del 'narratore' sia un'ottica stravolta, propria di un mondo anch'esso stravolto, che conosce solo la legge dell'interesse materiale ed ignora ogni sentimento disinteressato. (Baldi 146)

In the light of these astute judgments the reader of *La febre d'or* may recall that masterful paragraph in Part II, ch. iv, in which the narrator employs his best rhetoric in an attempt to justify the protagonist's gloating over his upcoming escapade with the alluring Mimí. With the empathy of a true accomplice, the na-

rrator probes into the banker's reveries and rationalizations and gives us a glimpse of a psyche to which the attributes of «stravolto» or even «trastornado» — to use the Hispanic term — begin to take hold:

L'aventura, d'altra banda, l'encisava de debò, i era per al nou potentat com episodi indispensable a la biografia de tot home milionari. Malgrat les honrades aprensions d'escàndol que assaltaven la consciència del menestral i feien trontollar son determini, causava una gran il·lusió al banquer l'anomenada d'eixerit i esplèndid que li daria el viatjar rumbosament amb una bagassa com aquella, que ell creia de cap de brot. «La *Mimí* tenia bona talla, bones carns, portava bé la roba, sabia guardar a la cara aquella fingida serietat de què solen revestir-se semblants dones per cridar l'atenció, semblar el dubte suficient i esvaïr l'alarma. Després d'una campanya com la feta amb en Llassada, podria ensenyar-lo a viatjar amb l'ostentació i les comoditats que ell volia, li faria conèixer fàcilment tot allò que de bo i de dolent hi havia a la gran capital, els refinaments més extremats, els racons més curiosos. Així, doncs, ni triada.... Quant a son cunyat Francesc... que era car, de topar-hi! París era tan gran! En canvi, no faltarien als *boulevards*, barcelonins que veurien el nou personatge de Barcelona lluint aquella *maitresse*, i a París i a Barcelona es parlaria d'ell amb el somris tolerant als llavis, l'admiració alegre als ulls. Promouria, en una paraula, una murmuració benèvola, d'aquells que augmenten el prestigi d'un home públic engrandint les resplendors de ses des preocupacions, de sa virilitat: no l'escàndol que degrada i abat a un home per sempre més. Ni l'anell al dit, doncs; ni l'anell al dit: no podia, de cap altra manera, estar més en caràcter un home com ell. ¿Com renunciar, així, a una ocasió tan falaguera?... I, després que... ell no per això abandonaria el treball ni faria mal a ningú. Es divertiria sense abandonar el negoci: heus-ho aquí. Tota la qüestió quedava senzillament reduïda a veure com se les arranjava per evitar l'escàndol de la família, el mal exemple a l'Eladi». (2.4; 516)

There is, of course, in masterpieces like Verga's *Mastro-don Gesualdo* and Oller's *La febre d'or* a mechanism for restoring order and for vindicating the «valori puri». In Verga we witness what Baldi calls the «straniamento rovesciato»: the estrangement from

reality produced by the less-than-reliable narrator is reversed by the tacit intervention of the reader and the author who are not contaminated by the hubris or the distortion of the narrator or the protagonist. As for Oller's narrative, the reversal is effected by actual characters who, like Catarina, Bernat and Francesc, courageously stand up against the transgressions perpetrated by Gil Foix and his cohorts. Oller's reliance on the involvement of specific characters dramatizes the conflict and reestablishes the equilibrium between those who espouse and cherish the *valori* and those who compromise them. In addition, in *La febre d'or* Oller situates the conflict in a social context in keeping with his urban setting. By contrast, Verga in *Mastro-don Gesualdo* keeps the focus of the narrative steadily on the protagonist. Thus the conflict is staged strictly within the inner theater of the protagonist's psyche, perceived and interpreted, of course, by the sympathetic observer.

In conclusion, a thorough comparative study between Verga and Oller would bring to light many coincidences together with some basic contrasts that we must not lose sight of. Verga's veristic canon, for instance, reflects a powerful instinctive impulse which G. M. Carsaniga describes as

the drive for social betterment, in its consecutive aspects of struggle for basic material needs, for superfluous wealth, for social status, for political power, and for the pleasures of life (352).

Oller, to be sure, shares many of Verga's concerns about the social climb. In fact, as Serrahima reminds us, the author of *La febre d'or*

fixava el seu esguard en el punt precís del qual partien els burgesos que s'enfilaven cap a posicions més elevades i al qual arribaven els menestrals que iniciaven la cursa ascensional (1088-9).

The notwithstanding, even as he adheres to a notion of life as a constant struggle played out more often than not in the fierce

competition of the stock market, Oller still harbors Romantic dreams about the wholesomeness of human nature. The contrast now becomes more apparent. On the one hand, Verga ends up, to quote Carsaniga again, with «pessimism and melancholy which compose the dominant mood of *Mastro-Don Gesualdo* (1889), caused by the collapse of every illusion; the house is revealed as an empty shell, the family as a group of strangers, wealth as a useless acquisition, status as leading to isolation and loneliness» (352). On the other hand, Oller does not, cannot arrive at such nihilistic conclusions. His existential outlook thrives on a paradoxical admixture of pessimism and optimism, an unlikely blend of a Romantic belief in heroes and heroines together with a sense of reality, which, as Serrahima is well aware, «ens torna a fer tocar de peus a terra» (1078). If we must use a label as an emblem of Oller's art of the narrative, we can do no better, in my opinion, than to borrow a happy phrase from Manuel Montoliu who, struck as we are by the paradoxical equilibrium at the core of Oller's artistic enterprise, aptly describes the gist of Oller's aesthetic as «realisme romàntic» and «romanticisme realista» (20).

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